

Election Procedures Review
Of
Mason County
State of Washington
2007 General Election



Conducted by the
Office of the Secretary of State
Election Certification and Training Program



Introduction

The Washington State Legislature enacted legislation in 1992 mandating that the Office of the Secretary of State review county election procedures and practices. The Election Certification and Training Program was established within the Elections Division of the Office of the Secretary of State to conduct reviews and to provide for the certification of election administrators. In 2005, the Legislature expanded the Election Certification and Training Program to require that each County Auditor's Office be reviewed at least once every three years. The Legislature also added a requirement that the Program conduct a follow-up visit to verify that the County Auditor's Office has taken steps to correct the problems noted in the report.

The election review process is governed by RCW 29A.04.510 through 29A.04.590 and Chapter 434-260 of the Washington Administrative Code.

Pursuant to RCW 29A.04.570(1)(b), the Election Certification and Training Program conducted an election review in Mason County during the 2007 General Election cycle. Kay Ramsay, Elections Program Coordinator, represented the Election Certification and Training Program during the review. Karen Herr, Mason County Auditor, Amber Cervantes, Elections Superintendent and other members of the staff participated on behalf of the Mason County Auditor's Office.

Both the reviewer and the Mason County Elections Department approached the review in a spirit of cooperation. The department allowed the reviewer to thoroughly review and examine all aspects of the election processes. The staff provided documentation and materials during the review which greatly contributed to a successful examination process.

The purpose of this review report is to provide the Mason County Elections Department with a useful evaluation of its election procedures and policies and to encourage procedural consistency in the administration of elections throughout the state. This review report includes a series of recommendations and/or suggestions that are intended to assist the Mason County Elections Department in improving and enhancing its election processes.

The reviewer is statutorily prohibited from making any evaluation, finding, or recommendation regarding the validity of any primary or election, or of any canvass of the election returns. Consequently, this review report should not be interpreted as affecting the validity of the outcome of any election or of any canvass of election returns.

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Overview

Mason County is located on the Olympic Peninsula and encompasses 961 square miles. The rank is 29 out of the 39 counties in Washington State for size, with a population of just over 53,000.

In the course of this review, the reviewer observed pre-election tasks, election procedures, post-election procedures, canvassing, and certification of the election. The election staff verbally explained the tasks the reviewer was unable to observe.

During the course of the review, staff members were extremely helpful and pleasant to work with. Morale in the office appears very high and the dedication of the staff is unmistakable. While this report lists some areas that need to be addressed, overall the Mason County Auditor's Office is doing an excellent job administering elections.

The elections superintendant, Amber Cervantes, for Mason County was hired in July 2007 and has made considerable progress with updating forms, letters, policies and procedures in a relatively short period of time.

Some of the recommendations in this report require relatively minor changes in the county's procedures. However, because elections are so complicated, even minor changes can have a major impact on the election process.

The following recommendations and suggestions will improve and enhance the county's election procedures and policies.

Recommendations

The following recommendations indicate where the county is out of compliance with the Revised Code of Washington (RCW), the Washington Administrative Code (WAC), the Washington State Constitution, or Federal election law. The reviewer obtained information based on actual observation of a procedure, verbal explanation or written procedures. The reviewer provides a description of the county's procedure, a citation of the applicable law, and a recommendation based on the citation.

Questionnaires to cities, towns and districts

The questionnaire sent to all of the cities, towns, and districts in the county to obtain information necessary for candidate filing was not sent in 2007. The questionnaire is required to be sent prior to March 1 each year.

The questionnaire used in 2006 listed the current information regarding incumbents, positions, terms, and asked the district to confirm that the information is correct. It did not list salary information nor were the districts asked to provide that information.

WAC 434-215-005 requires, "Prior to March 1 of each year, the county auditor shall send a questionnaire to the administrative authority of each local jurisdiction for which the auditor is the candidate filing officer subject to the provisions of RCW [29A.04.321](#) and [29A.04.330](#). The purpose of the questionnaire shall be to confirm information which the auditor may disseminate to the public regarding the filing for elective offices."

"The questionnaire should request, as a minimum, confirmation of offices to be filled at the general election that year, the name of the incumbent, and the annual salary for the position at the time of the filing period."

Recommendation: The Mason County Elections Department must send the questionnaire to all cities, towns, and districts each year. The questionnaire must also request that the districts verify salary information.

Ongoing absentee voters

In May of 2005, the County Commissioners for Mason County passed a resolution to conduct all primary, special and general elections entirely by mail. Even though Mason County conducts all of its elections by mail, all voters in Mason County are flagged in the voter registration system as ongoing or permanent absentee voters.

WAC 434-250-030(1) states, "As authorized by RCW [29A.40.040](#), requests for status as an ongoing absentee voter must be made in writing. With the exception of county auditors who conduct primaries and elections entirely by mail, each county auditor must provide applications for requests made in writing."

RCW 29A.40.040 requires, "Any registered voter may apply, in writing, for status as an ongoing absentee voter. Each qualified applicant shall automatically receive an absentee ballot for each ensuing election or primary for which the voter is entitled to vote and need not submit a separate request for each election."

Recommendation: Only voters with a written request on file should be listed as ongoing absentee voters.

Precincts cannot have more than 900 active registered voters. Ongoing absentee voters may be subtracted from the total number of active registered voters to determine the total number in a precinct. Reducing the number of ongoing absentee voters may require dividing, altering, combining or creating new precincts in Mason County.

Suggestions

The following are suggestions for increasing efficiency and improving operations within the County Auditor's Office. Although these suggestions do not address issues involving compliance with state laws or administrative rules, the reviewer identified the tasks as areas of election administration in which the County Auditor might improve the efficiency and operation of the office.

Ballot Processing

The Elections Supervisor communicated that it is office policy to only use red ink pens in the ballot processing area. The reviewer observed black and blue ink pens on the tables while ballots were being processed.

Suggestion: Use of distinctive ink colors (i.e. red, orange, or pink) provides additional assurance of proper ballot management. It is recommended that the policy be continued and efforts made for consistent implementation.

Ballot Inspection

An official hand recount was required after certification of one of the issues on the ballot. This resulted in two additional votes counted that had not been counted in the original tabulation. The marks on the ballot were light and apparently the tabulator had not been able to read the votes.

Suggestion: In this case the additional votes did not change the outcome of the election, but that may not be the case in future elections. Understanding what marks the tabulator will and will not read could improve the ballot inspection process.

The vendor may also be contacted to discuss the possibility of adjusting the sensitivity of the tabulation equipment.

Workspace

Mason County has made good use of the office's limited workspace. The space, while organized, is used for multiple tasks, such as checking signatures, processing ballots, tabulating ballots, conducting canvassing board meetings, etc.

While adequate for smaller elections, the space will not be adequate for large turnout elections. The department does not have room to conduct multiple tasks or to accommodate the extra help needed for such an election.

Suggestion: Following the 2004 Governor's race, there has been greater emphasis on the accuracy and accountability of ballot processing. The current work space arrangement could jeopardize the accuracy of operations in the office, especially this year where voter turnout and therefore the volume of ballots to process is expected to be heavy. The county should provide more workspace for the elections department.

Voter Registration Management System

Mason County currently uses Power Profile as the voter registration management system. While it is one of the systems approved by the state, the system seems inadequate for the needs of the county.

Suggestion: Mason County should develop a plan to replace the Power Profile system. There are at least two other approved voter registration management systems that would meet the county's needs.

County's Response to Draft Review Report

The Election Certification and Training Program issued a Draft Review Report to the Mason County Canvassing Board in March 2008. In accordance with WAC 434-260-145, we provided Mason County 10 days to respond, in writing, to recommendations listed in the draft report.

The Mason County Canvassing Board provided the following response to the Draft Review Report. The signed original of their response is on file in the Office of the Secretary of State.



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Mason County
Auditor

Mason County Election Review

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March 13, 2008

Kay Ramsay
Office of the Secretary of State
Certification and Training Program
P.O. Box 40229
Olympia, WA 98504-0229

Dear Ms. Ramsay,

Attached is our written response to the recommendations and suggestions in the Election Procedures Review conducted by the Secretary of State's Office during the 2007 General Election.

This review was beneficial in helping us identify a few areas that needed improvement and was a positive opportunity for us to demonstrate our commitment to conducting elections according to required law. I am pleased that the reviewer noted that overall Mason County is doing an excellent job administering elections.

Mason County always welcomes the opportunity to improve the integrity of our election process that the voters expect and deserve. We appreciate the time you took in conducting this review and for recognizing our successful election operation.

Please let us know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Karen L. Herr
Mason County Auditor

Tim Sheldon
Chair, Board of County
Commissioners

Monty Cobb
Civil Deputy Prosecutor

**Auditor's Response to
Secretary of State's review of
The Mason County Elections Office**

Recommendation 1: Questionnaires to cities, towns and districts.

Response: As of March 2008, questionnaires will be sent to all jurisdictions requesting confirmation on offices to be filled and requesting salary information.

Recommendation 2: Ongoing absentee voters.

Response: Duly noted. Our current voter registration system assigns all voters to the permanent absentee status. As soon as we replace this system, we will assign all voters to the all-mail status. Shortly after the 2010 census, Mason County anticipates dividing, altering, and combining many districts and precincts in Mason County - which will ensure no precinct has over 900 registered voters.

Suggestion 1: Ballot Processing.

Response: Mason County's policy is to use only red ink pens at the ballot processing area. We will make a conscientious effort to consistently implement this policy.

Suggestion 2: Ballot Inspection.

Response: Duly noted. Mason County had both scanners serviced and we will continue to ensure what marks will be counted in the original tabulation during our pre-tests.

Suggestion 3: Workspace.

Response: Mason County wholeheartedly agrees with this suggestion. Our current workspace is inadequate for processing all-mail elections, conducting multiple tasks, and accommodating the extra help needed in large turnout elections. Request will be made for better accommodations.

Suggestion 4: Voter Registration Management System

Response: Mason County wholeheartedly agrees with this suggestion. We believe the Power Profile system is inadequate for our needs. Our plan is to replace this system within two years - using revenue from our Election Equipment Holding account.

Conclusion

The reviewer commends Mason County Auditor's Office for its election procedures. The attention to detail, organization, and dedication to the election process was evident in every area.

During the review, the staff members were professional and cooperative. The elections department does an excellent job accounting for and reconciling the ballots in their possession. The elections staff is very conscientious about handling and securing the ballots.

The recommendations made by the reviewer in this report are for consideration by the Mason County Auditor and County Canvassing Board. These are meant to enhance and improve Mason County's elections procedures. None of the recommendations in this report would in any way affect the integrity of the election. The Office of the Secretary of State is available for any additional assistance the County Auditor may request.

Review Report Prepared by:

Kay Ramsay
Elections Program Specialist
Office of the Secretary of State

Date: March 2008

Signature:



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